THE STRANGER
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PSALM 47
LUKE 24:13-31
"…he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him." (Luke 24:30, 31)

The sacred moments, the moments of miracle, are often the everyday moments,
the moments which, if we do not look with more than our eyes
or listen with more than our ears, reveal only . . .
the gardener, a stranger coming down the road behind us,
a meal like any other meal.
But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with all our being
and our imagination––what we may see is Jesus himself,
and what we may hear is the first faint sound of a voice somewhere deep within us
saying that there is a purpose in this life, in our lives . . .
because everything is in the hands of God.
This is what the stories about Jesus' coming back to life mean,
because Jesus was the love of God, alive among us.

Frederick Buechner
The Magnificent Defeat

As you came to unexpecting disciples as they sat down to dinner, so come to us
as we gather this morning. Startle us, O God, with your truth and goodness and immediacy.
Open us to your gracious presence and the power of your love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

I received an email this week from my friend, Bill Lytle, a retired Presbyterian minister and former Moderator of the General Assembly. Bill's wife Faith died two weeks ago, and he reported to his circle of friends around the country and told them about the Memorial Service at Madison Square Presbyterian Church in San Antonio, which was followed by the typical reception, "a celebration" Bill said, "with chocolate cake and ice cream, her favorites."

Part of the time-honored ritual of dealing with loss has to do with food, with eating together. After the Memorial Service or the funeral we return to the home, or the club or the restaurant or, in thousands of parishes across the land, to the church basement for lunch. It is part of what needs to happen, it seems, and everybody knows it intuitively.

“After great pain a formal feeling comes,” a poet said. But also, after great pain, food comes: a vegetable tray with dip, lime Jello, finger sandwiches with the crusts cut off, strawberry tarts, and coffee.

It’s “Chicken Soup for the Soul,” that wonderful Jewish tradition of responding to human crisis, be it emotional, physical, financial, or relational, with a bowl of chicken soup. That phrase also points to one of the remarkable publishing phenomena of our time, *Chicken Soup for the Soul,* a collection of small, readable inspiring essays. It is so successful that it has spawned no fewer than nineteen spin offs: *A 2nd Helping of Chicken Soup for the Soul* (and a *3rd, 4th,* and 5th *Helping*), *Condensed Chicken Soup for the Soul, Chicken Soup for the Mother’s Soul* (a gift suggestion in case you haven’t taken care of that business yet), *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul, Chicken Soup for the Country Soul, Chicken Soup for Pet Lover’s Soul.* And what is remarkable is that nowhere that I could discover do the editors and publishers explain the meaning of the title. They don’t have to. Everyone knows that “Chicken Soup” refers to something important about us, something deeper than our daily caloric intake, a need in us deeper than physical hunger.

One of my fondest memories, which surfaces annually on this day, is of my mother, standing at the gas stove, presiding over a collection of pots and pans from which emanated amazing and mouth-watering odors. I don’t have any difficulties at all translating that memory into security, safety, nurture and love. It was an important learning for me, however, when she told me once that she didn’t exactly share my romantic memory, that it was hard work and while she was proficient at it, it wasn’t her favorite activity. She would really rather have been reading a novel. Food preparation is no longer gender specific, thankfully. Even those of us who came along under the old system find our way into the kitchen.

Food is more than fuel. Food can be and often is the occasion of intimacy, community, peace making, healing. Of her long marriage Madeline L’Engle wrote: “Bread we ate together became more than bread.”

And so it was that two followers of Jesus found themselves sitting at table sharing the evening meal with a stranger. It was the first day of the week after his sudden, cruel execution by the Roman authorities. Jesus had died. There was no doubt about that. These two, along with his other followers, had watched in dismay as the crowds that had welcomed him to the city

turned against him, and the Romans, concerned with public order, made a strategic decision to put him to death. In the space of a few days the disciples had to confront the possibility that their hopes, that in him a better day had come, that God's promised reign of peace finally, and justice, had arrived, were no more than that: hopes. And now, it seemed, they were not even that. Jesus was dead and the disciples grieved the loss, but they also grieved for the end of the dream and the resumption of the deadly, meaningless reality of their lives without him.

And so two of them, Cleopas and another who remains unnamed, decided to go for a walk to a place called Emmaus. Curiously, although archeologists are able to locate and identify many, if not most of the sites mentioned in the Bible––Bethlehem, Nazareth, Capernaum––Emmaus has never been found. And it has been suggested that Luke, the writer, meant it that way. Nor, for that matter, are the two followers of Jesus ever mentioned again. So maybe Emmaus is where you go to try to cope with great loss, grief, disappointment. Maybe the two represent all of us as we cope with life's incredible losses.

As they walk, they talk about what they had experienced that week. When someone you love dies, you talk about him or her. You tell stories, many of them old and much-told stories. "Remember the time he . . . Remember when she said. . ." It's part of why we have those receptions after the memorial service, so we can tell the stories. As they walk and talk a stranger joins them. Curiously, they do not recognize him. They continue to talk, now with him, about what they experienced, how their friend had died. Then, near the end of the day, they invite the stranger to stay with them and to join them for dinner. And when he broke the loaf of bread and gave it to them, it was reminiscent of the way Jesus had done that many times, but so memorably on the night of his betrayal and arrest, at their Last Supper. As he broke bread and they ate together something extraordinary happened. They recognized him. It was Jesus. And then he was gone.

I love that story because it suggests that Jesus Christ comes to us unexpectedly, not in the ways we anticipate, but surprisingly, literally startling us. Frederick Buechner wrote about the times in life when it seems like the bottom has fallen out, when we find ourselves wondering whether our little lives mean anything, whether we're headed anywhere in particular or simply meandering through six or seven or eight decades. "It is precisely at such times that Jesus is apt to come," Buechner wrote, "into the very midst of life at its most real and inexplicable." And how might that happen we ask? Not as we expect. "Not in a blaze of unearthly light, not in the midst of a sermon, not in the throes of some religious daydream, but at supper time, or walking along a road. . . . He never approaches from on high, but always in the midst of people, in the midst of real life and the questions that real life asks. . .." [The Magnificent Defeat, p. 87]

There is an old, old heresy that has long-term durability: the notion that we will encounter the holy, the sacred, God, if you will, not in this world, certainly not in this messy life of ours, but apart, away from this world and this life. The idea is that if you want to meet Jesus, you have to put some distance between yourself and the noisy, busyness of life. Go on retreat or go deep inside in meditation; shut out the world. This notion is based on the way the ancient Greeks saw the world: two realms––the material realm, the world of matter, of human bodies and their appetites, a world of decay and death, the world in which we do most of our living and loving; and the spiritual realm––apart from all that is finite and mortal and sensual, an ethereal world of the spirit. Early Christianity, which was thoroughly Jewish and knew nothing of this dualistic concept, came under the influence of Greek thinking ––Hellenism ––and adopted it. Medieval Christianity became convinced that the world is a pretty bad place, to be avoided, escaped. Religion should deliver you from the world with all its messiness, the flesh with all its temptations. Sex was for the purpose of reproduction, period. Clergy should be celibate, the church should build an alternate world to represent the holy realm of God. “The City of God and the City of Man” Augustine wrote.

Part of what the Protestant Reformation was about and continues to be about is to remember that there is only one city, and it is the City of God and Man. The world and all that is in it is God’s good creation, blessed and loved by God. Humankind, while capable of great tragedy and profound evil, is also a reflection of the very being of God and is capable of great beauty and great good. Humanness, human needs and desires and appetites, while subject to abuse and misuse, was created in us by God.

One of the best articulations of this and the way it appears in contemporary religion and spirituality is in a wonderfully witty book by Episcopal theologian Robert Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb*. In it he writes, “There is a habit that plagues many so-called spiritual minds, they imagine that matter and spirit are somehow at odds with each other and that the right course for human life is to escape the world of matter into some finer and purer (and undoubtedly duller) realm.” That, Capon says, is a crashing theological mistake. “Because it was God who invented dirt, onion and turnip greens; God who invented human beings, with their strange compulsion to cook their food. We are made in the image of the ultimate materialist.”

Food, Capon says, is more than fuel to keep us going. Food can delight and astonish us and be cause for us to sit down with those we love and actually create our humanity.

As is the case with many gourmet cooks, Capon doesn't think much of diets, particularly the current fads. If you want to lose weight, he says, stop eating so much. Fast. When you eat, eat. It will get me in a lot of trouble but I love what he has to say about butter, eggs, and salt, which he says are known as "the enemy, deadly to our health."

"Butter glorifies everything it touches; eggs are, pure and simple, one of the wonders of the world; salt is the perfector of all flavors. Put them together, you get, not sudden death, but Hollandaise which in a way is no less a marvel than the Gothic arch, the computer chip, and a Bach Fugue."

We are still inclined to assume that if God comes to us it will be in some otherworldly extraordinary experience, some shattering emotional upheaval, some lightening bolt out of the blue that knocks us down; or in the midst of some deep spiritual journey, profound prayer and meditation. We Presbyterians sometimes assume that if God comes to us it will be after we have read enough books and understood enough theology, after we have written the perfect creed and arrived at the satisfactory answer to all of life's vexing questions.

This story of two people walking on the road to Emmaus and a stranger who turns out to be Jesus coming to them – suggests that all those assumptions are dead wrong.

"He comes" Buechner says, "out nowhere like the first clear light of the sun after a thunderstorm. . . . The sacred moments, the moments of miracle, are often the everyday moments, the moments which, if we do not look with more than our eyes, or listen with more than our ears, reveal only–– the gardener, a stranger coming down the road behind me, a meal like any other. But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with all our being and our imagination –– what we may see is Jesus himself."

The late Langdon Gilkey, one of the great theologians of our time, taught at the University of Chicago and wrote an important book: "Naming the Whirlwind." One memorable chapter focused on what he called "Ultimacy in Secular Experience," that is, knowing God in the ordinary events of life. I got it out and looked at it again this week. When I read it years ago it was like a light coming on. Gilkey called it "Common Grace," "our deep joy in living, a sense of the pulsating vitality and strength of life that every creature knows: the awe at the common wonder and beauty of life –– perhaps at the birth of a child, the precious sense of meaning and hope when we find some purpose or activity that moves us out of our power, and we know who we are: the wonder of community and intimacy with another human being –– these common experiences are given to us."

We experience God, the theologian said, in the depths of our own lives, in the midst of life, and especially, he said, at the mysterious edges, at birth and at death. To experience either or both is to know the reality of mystery, to know that we do not know everything, it is to be in the presence of God.

They recognized the risen Christ during the evening meal. And so I would suggest to you it always is that way, if we have eyes to see and hearts open to love. Christ is present when 100 needy men and women arrive here at 5:00 this evening for Sunday Night Supper and are served their evening meal along with supportive social services and a large helping of love by our staff and volunteers. And the risen Christ is present over at Catholic Charities tomorrow night as our Deacons and volunteers serve Monday night supper to another 100 homeless and needy neighbors. And the risen Christ is present when you sit at table today with your loved ones and friends, with mothers, fathers, grandparents. The risen Christ is present particularly, I think, if you will eat alone today, to remind you that you are never truly alone.

Years ago, when I was privileged to serve for a summer as the pastor of a small church in the Western Highlands of Scotland, the Clerk of the Session and I went to a Presbytery meeting in the next village. Unlike our American Presbyteries which are large, incorporating ministers and elders from 100 or so churches, and Presbytery meetings which are long, this one involved seven ministers and seven lay people from the churches in the locale. They took care of their business in about twenty minutes and then got down to the real purpose of the meeting, which was the evening meal. It was a very pleasant affair, the conversation was easy and friendly: they were interested in my ministry in America and eager to tell me about theirs. At the end of the meal their custom was to celebrate communion. The minister who presided, one of the older men present, Johnny Blair was his name, read the story of the two on the road to Emmaus recognizing Jesus when the stranger broke the bread. He closed the Bible and told a story I will never forget. He was an infantryman with the Scots Guards who went to France with the British Expeditionary Forces in the early days of World War II. Retreating back to Dunkirk he was captured and spent the next five years in a series of prisoner of war camps, each one more dismal and grim than the one before. Near the end of the war, with supplies depleted, the Germans reduced food rations to a piece of moldy bread and thin soup, and finally only the watery soup. Men began to get sick and starve and die. The situation was beyond hopeless. Some men tried to escape and were caught and executed. Some threw themselves into the electrified barbed wire fences to end it all. A few days before their liberation Blair decided that he might as well do it himself, and as he approached the fence in the dark night he realized he was not alone. There was a man on the other side, a Polish farmer. The man threw something over the fence. Blair picked it up.

It was a potato. Out of the darkness the man said, in broken English, “The body of Christ.”

And so he comes to us––out of the depths and in the mysteries, at birth and at death, and in the everyday ordinariness of our lives. He is our guest––we are his guest, every time we sit at table.

Our risen Lord, Jesus Christ.
All praise to him.

Amen.